

Spirituality and Religious Faith in a Hermeneutic Psychology

APA Presentation

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Hermeneutics is one of those conceptions that has a short past but a long history. Perhaps all important conceptions share this feature, but the notion of hermeneutics is peculiar in this regard. In one sense, it is as old as those who have attempted to interpret and make sense of texts, whether oral or written. In another sense, it is a relatively recent entry onto the historical scene. The particular species under discussion here, ontological hermeneutics, is mainly a twentieth century phenomenon – even the latter half of the twentieth century. Certainly, it is relatively new to the discipline of psychology; philosophers and psychologists are still attempting to understand its properties and its parameters. This is not to say that we do not already know a lot about it. Nevertheless, its limits and its liabilities for psychology are still being explored – hence our symposium today.

The purpose of my part of this symposium is to explore the relation of hermeneutics to spirituality and religious faith. This is not an easy task, because the literature on this relation is scant. Indeed, it is so scant that one might infer that there is no such relation. I will argue here, however, that this inference is false. I will contend that spirituality and religious faith are not only related to hermeneutics but also may be necessary to understand its full promise. Why, then, is this aspect of hermeneutics not more widely discussed? This is the first of my tasks today: to clear the obstructions that have prevented a productive dialogue between religion and hermeneutics. However, I do not wish to stop with this clearing. My second task is to show how such a dialogue will enrich the parties in the dialogue.

Obstructions to the Dialogue

Let me first concede that few hermeneuticists over the years have made explicit connections to religion and spirituality. Of course, this depends to some extent on whom one considers hermeneutical. Clearly, there are hermeneutically inclined theologians, such as Rudolf Bultmann, Soren Kierkegaard, and Martin Buber who have drawn explicit connections. However, like any mode of thought, there is a core of scholars – in this case, a core of philosophers – who have a special status in defining and delineating the issues of hermeneutics. Perhaps surprisingly, many of these core philosophers are themselves religious. Heidegger, for example, is probably the most controversial and ambiguous in this regard, yet he asked for communion, confession, and mass before he died.¹ Gadamer, as another instance, is frankly Protestant (Lutheran, to be precise), whereas Taylor and Ricoeur are Catholic and French Calvinist respectively. Yet, few of even these core hermeneutic thinkers have discussed the relation between their personal religious beliefs and their hermeneutics. Why?

I believe the answer to this question entails cultural as well as intellectual factors. First, it is simply “understood” in our Western academic culture that sophisticated scholars do not express their religious convictions in scholastic forums. Religion is considered too personal and private to be addressed in conventions such as these. Many scholars also fear that they will be perceived as proselytizing their audiences. Although a case could be made that all scholars, even those reporting supposedly objective facts, are attempting to persuade and thus proselytize their audiences, religious proselytizing is viewed as impolite in academic venues. Religion is considered to involve passionate persuasion, whereas academic scholarship involves dispassionate inquiry. Therefore, one is not allowed to discuss what one knows best or considers the most truthful – such as

one's own religious beliefs – because this would be seen as violating the culture of dispassionate inquiry.

As important as this culture is, I believe that intellectual concerns play a greater role in obstructing formal religious inquiry among hermeneuticists. Perhaps most pertinent (or impertinent to many hermeneuticists) is the way in which many people view religious truth. Here I do not mean to refer to a specific theology or a comparative religion lesson; I am more interested in how religious truth has come to be regarded in Western culture generally. Foremost in this regard is the notion that religious truth is unchangeable and metaphysical. Truth can never change – being eternal, universal, and complete – and truth can never be a physical or contextual thing, because physical things and contexts constantly change.

This is not to say that all religious people claim to know this truth completely. Humans are mutable and physical, so we are not set up well to grasp metaphysical and unchangeable entities. For many, only the divine has this complete knowledge. This is the reason that many divine or supreme beings are thought to be omniscient; their knowledge of the complete, universal, and immutable truth means they know everything of consequence, forevermore. This is also the reason that such beings are endowed with supreme authority; they know the truth for anyone at anytime. This authority implies that their commandments should be obeyed without question.

From the previous presentations today, it should be easy to see why some hermeneuticists have problems with this view of religious truth and this understanding of divine beings. Dialogue, for example, would seem to be precluded. Religious truth is already set, so why discuss it? Indeed, divine beings would presumably cut through any dialogue and state authoritatively what is correct and true, for now and for evermore.

This type of divine monologue would not only prevent hermeneutic dialogue but also remove the open-endedness and changeability of truth that is the hallmark of the hermeneutic position. No wonder there is such scant literature on religion in hermeneutics. Even if hermeneutic scholars wanted to establish a rapprochement between their personal religion and their professional scholarship, there would seem to be significant obstructions to doing so.

The Possibility of Dialogue

But how real are these obstructions? How have religious truth and divine beings come to be conceptualized in this way? The religious answer is revelation; these qualities of truth and divinity stem from what has been revealed in scripture and prayer. However, this answer begs a distinctly hermeneutical question: How is it that religious people have come to understand and interpret the information of revelation in this manner? Revelation is like any other type of information in that it is always underdetermined. That is, no information in itself completely determines its own meaning. The receiver of information is always in the position of providing a necessary context for communication to occur.

This underdetermination has been most rigorously demonstrated in the philosophy of science, where the data of science have been shown to underdetermine the results of science. Data provide important information, to be sure, but they are not completely meaningful as results without a cultural and theoretical context in which to situate them. Indeed, we now know that data can have different meanings, depending on the context in which they are interpreted. Likewise, revelation “data” can have different meanings depending on the context in which they are interpreted. Revelation is

important, to be sure, but the cultural framework used to interpret revelation is also important to its ultimate meaning.

It is my contention that this interpretive framework is the source of the obstruction between the religious and the hermeneutical. As I shall show in due course, it is not the revelation itself, in most cases, that obstructs this rapprochement; it is the Hellenistic interpretation of that revelation – the “philosophy of men,” as one scripture writer put it² -- that is the problem. Hellenism, as I use it here, concerns those aspects of Greek culture and philosophy that have endured into our present culture. As a respected philosopher once said, “All of Western philosophy is but a series of footnotes to Plato.” My contention is that our Western understanding of religious truth and supreme divinity is also part of that series.

As it happens, the main points at issue between hermeneutics and religion are two of the main points of Hellenism. As Thorleif Boman (1960) and James Faulconer (1999) have shown, Hellenists have a peculiar understanding of change. Because the Hellenist’s root metaphor is space and space does not change, other fundamental aspects of reality, such as truth, are considered not to change. Moreover, truth is universal and encompassing of all things like space, and truth is nonphysical like space, because neither can be held or seen.

If this sounds at all familiar, it is because it is the intellectual root of our Western understanding of truth, which has formed the cultural framework for our understanding of religious truth. Indeed, both Boman and Faulconer contrast this Greek understanding with a Hebrew understanding. The root metaphor for the Hebrews is time rather than space, mutability rather than immutability. This means that what is fundamental and thus what is truthful from the Hebrew perspective is not the unchangeable, the universal, and

the final; what is truthful is the temporal, the becoming, and the contextual, including the contextual dialogue between believer and divinity. Consequently, the Hebrew worldview is dramatically closer to that of the hermeneuticists than that of the Greeks. If we further realize that the Hebrew worldview is the crucible for several important world religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, then it is easy to envision a fascinating dialogue, absent Hellenistic obstructions, between religion and hermeneutics.

What would such a dialogue be like? I believe that there is an intriguing tension or “play,” as Gadamer would put it, between these previously unrelated and yet powerful modes of thinking. Let us begin the conversation with what I believe is the best book on hermeneutics in psychology, entitled Re-envisioning Psychology, by two of our panelists, Frank Richardson and Blaine Fowers, and one of our audience members, Charles Guignon. One of the many strengths of this book is its repeated demonstration that no system of thought can escape morality. Objectivist systems and relativist systems alike are founded upon and ultimately promote hidden moral agendas. Yet, many of these agendas in psychology, particularly in method systems, are unarticulated and unexamined. This means that psychologists are routinely purveying values in the name of objectivity.

Interestingly, when the authors of this book offer their own hermeneutical approach to psychology, they stop short of articulating their own moral agenda for the discipline. I think I understand this. If they did prescribe a specific morality, they would risk appearing moralistic, and a hermeneutic morality is complex and nontraditional. For these reasons, Richardson and his comrades offer instead a fascinating, dialogical methodology for identifying and resolving moral issues. The problem is, as these authors know all too well, even this hermeneutic method is founded upon specific moral values.

Although I saw no explicit rendering of these values in the book, a hermeneutic of their hermeneutic easily reveals values like respect, humility, openness, and caring in their dialogical method. But why select these particular values? This question seems important, because these are the values the authors are tacitly proffering for guiding our disciplinary dialogue about values.

Sources of Values

At this point, many hermeneuticists would immediately point to tradition and/or history. One of the key contentions of hermeneutics is that we begin with the familiar, the “always/already,” a pre-understanding of morality. Undoubtedly, these authors, in their selection of these particular values, came upon what had been “hammered out” over time. I have no problem with this. My problem is that this explanation seems incomplete: Why this particular hammering out and not some other? Yes, morality is hammered out in the relations among people across history, but why these relations?

I submit that there are three possible answers to this type of question: natural laws, arbitrary relations, and spiritual explanations. The first, natural laws, encompasses all the explanations that rely on natural mechanisms such pleasure/pain as well as supposedly self-evident propositions and principles for deriving morality. In all cases, nature is counted on to provide our morality. Some evolution of values occurs, or some innate “voice” of morality is discerned. In either case, hermeneuticists have long been aware that one cannot derive the moral from natural processes that are amoral. Part of the problem is that natural processes are typically understood Hellenistically – as being governed by unchangeable laws and principles. This implies that the moral and the valuable are derived from close-ended truths, monological natural authorities, and metaphysical reductions, to name but a few problems for the hermeneuticist.

The second of these value selection processes – arbitrary relations – is, I believe, equally problematic. Arbitrary relations entail all those explanations of morality that boil down to happenstance or chance. Included are all those subjective and projective explanations, such as social and existential constructivisms, that assume that the reason certain things are valued is because of some chance event of human history – usually some invention of the human mind. That is, things do not matter in themselves; they matter only because of some arbitrary construction of the mind -- somewhere, somehow - - that just happened to become reified or institutionalized by an individual or a society. To those of you who know the leading hermeneutical thinkers, such as Charles Taylor, nothing could be further from their positions. Values are not merely invented or projected; they have a real existence as meanings in the world. When a child is brutalized, this is a morally reprehensible action, not just an arbitrary construction of a particular society. My question is: How do we know this brutality is morally reprehensible, when we do not inherit this sense from our nature and do not arbitrarily construct this value?

Here, I believe that a third source of morality has been overlooked – spirituality and religion. In one sense, this claim is not especially provocative, because the influence of religion in human history has long been recognized. However, this influence is frequently misunderstood as a variation on naturalist or constructionist forces. Hellenism is a good example of this misunderstanding, where religion is considered an aggregation of God's immutable principles. What if we took religion seriously and considered spirituality as a separate source of morality and values? Even here, the meaning of spirituality in our culture is so broad that this consideration is next to meaningless. I have a California friend who would count his pyramid as a source of spirituality.

However, I believe that a hermeneutic ontology could provide the independence from naturalism and constructivism that is needed to conceptualize a thoroughly spiritual source of morality. Ruling out naturalistic and arbitrary approaches to spirituality would also take care of many “pyramid” type options, because these rely on either naturalistic metaphysical entities or constructivist “mind over matter” powers. A hermeneutic source of spirituality would require some sort of: a) agency and thus possibility, b) irreducibility and thus otherness than “me,” 3) nonarbitrariness and thus access to a contextual truth, and 4) ability to communicate and thus carry on a dialogue. We could perhaps include other requirements, but a spiritual agent that could understand particular contexts and yet provide an irreducible other for instructive moral dialogue would clearly begin to fill the hermeneutic bill.

But where are such spiritual agents to be found? I submit that they are to be found in many of the world’s religions. When a Hellenistic framework for interpreting truth, authority, and change is removed, the revelation that remains in these religions is easily understandable in hermeneutic terms. Am I just remaking religion and revelation in my own hermeneutical image? I do not think so, though this is always a possibility – a possibility, I would add, made apparent by hermeneutics rather than concealed by it.

Still, even a quick overview of a few religions reveals the spiritual qualities that fit a hermeneutic account of spirituality. C. S. Lewis, for example, sees Christianity as the ultimate contextual truth when Christ said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Notice that Christ did not say that he brought the propositions of truth with him, or even that he exemplified the natural laws of truth. He states quite plainly that he, as a physical and fully contextual agent, is the truth. Christianity, then, is primarily about a

relationship or a hermeneutic dialogue with this truth, not an incorporation of Hellenistic propositions and commandments.

Interestingly, Islam and Judaism are also primarily about relationship – Allah and God respectively. As Rabbi Wylen (1989) makes clear in his Introduction to Judaism, “We do not know about God. Rather, God is known through direct and intimate relationship” (p. 34). Similarly, The Essential Teachings of Islam extols the relationship that mortals can have with Allah and the dialogue that is available with this spiritual agency. Of course, dialogue is the essential function of prayer in these traditions. Prayer is not merely tuning into the monologue of Allah, God, or Christ; it is a true conversation and fellowship.

But what type of dialogue can one really have with a spiritual agent of this sort? Here Hellenism rears its ugly head with the assumption that authority must be monological or it is not authoritative. From a hermeneutical standpoint, a true dialogue requires real give and take, and a willingness to be transformed, both on the believer’s part and on the part of the spiritual agent. Clearly, this is a deeper, more complex issue in the realm of comparative religion: Can a spiritual agent really change in response to a dialogue with a mortal? Nevertheless, as I mentioned earlier, many scholars already see such change as inherent in the Hebrew tradition. If anything, divine beings are expected to move and change with the movements and changes of the times and the situations.

Buddhists are explicit about such change. In the Teachings of the Buddha, for example, the Buddha makes clear that “All existing things are impermanent [and] uncertain (p. 54) To Buddha every definitive thing is illusion” (p. 59). With change and temporality so central to these spiritual traditions, nothing stands in the way of true hermeneutic dialogue. In this sense, Tevye’s dialogue with God in Fiddler on the Roof is

a truer depiction of a spiritual relationship than some monological reception of God's principles.

Interestingly, when we see religion in this fashion (absent the usual Hellenistic lens), hermeneuticists seem to be pointing continually to spiritual sources in their writings. Gadamer, for example, makes clear in his book Philosophical Hermeneutics that "in every dialogue a spirit rules" (p. 66). This is his famous concept of game, where there is a form of play or spirit that governs the dialogue. But what type of spirit is involved in this play? Gadamer elaborates in another passage that "neither partner [in a dialogue] constitutes the real determining factor; rather, it is the unified form of movement . . . [which] is taken up into a higher determination that is the really decisive factor" (emphasis added, p. 54). But again, what does Gadamer mean by "higher determination"? In still another passage, the religious connotations of his meaning are hard to escape when he uses terms like "I and Thou" (with a capital "T;" p. 66), and the "gracious act of God" (p. 54).

Conclusion

In conclusion, I set for myself two basic tasks in this presentation. Given the paucity of literature on hermeneutics and religion, I first wanted to begin an earnest dialogue between these two parties. Although many hermeneuticists are themselves religious, there is still a prevalent lunacy that says scholars should not discuss, let alone advocate, what they personally believe and consider the truth. I would think that this fear of the passionate and personal would be minimized in hermeneutical approaches, since the emphasis on the dispassionate and impersonal is a clear legacy of objectivism. Perhaps if the intellectual barriers of Hellenism can be overcome, we can begin to see what role religion might play in a hermeneutic psychology.

Certainly, as my second task, I have speculated that this role could be substantial. Hermeneuticists have successfully argued, I believe, that all systems of thought must start with a set of values. However, this implies that no system of thought – whether naturalist, constructivist, or even hermeneutical – can produce the set of values that ground it. Similar to logic itself, an initial premise or value must be in place before logic, rationality, or any system can begin. What then is the nature of this beginning set of values?

Kierkegaard coined the term “leap of faith” to capture the essence of these beginning values. He used the term “leap” to indicate their nonsystemic and nonrational nature, but he also knew that a mere leap would leave the values arbitrary and without any real meaning. No, the leap had to be guided by “faith,” Kierkegaard’s name for the spiritual presence that transcends all human made systems, but guides us, if we are open to it, to the values that are truly valuable. The virtue of hermeneutics is that its ontology can help us get us beyond the Hellenistic obstructions to a true relationship with this spiritual presence.

¹ Whether Heidegger was religious is difficult. He was a devout Catholic who left the Catholic Church because he had become, intellectually, a Protestant. Later he declared himself an atheist, but this declaration must be understood in context: he did not believe in the God of the philosophers. For most of his life, he said next to nothing about his personal religious beliefs, though Gadamer has personally told James Faulconer (Personal Communication, 2000) that Heidegger remained a religious man. To support this, we know that Heidegger received communion and made confession before he died and that he asked that mass be said for his funeral.

²For example, the Apostle Paul – Colossians 2:8